

IN A HALF WORLD OF TERROR
(aka I WAS A TEENAGE GRAVE ROBBER)

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CHAPTER ONE

It was like a nightmare. Like some unreal dream that you wake up from the next morning. Only this nightmare was happening. Ahead of me I could see Rankin's flashlight; a large yellow eye in the sultry summer darkness. I tripped over a gravestone and almost went sprawling. Rankin whirled on me with a hissed oath.

"Do you want to wake up the caretaker, you fool?"

I muttered a reply and we crept forward. Finally, Rankin stopped and shone the flashlight's beam on a freshly chiseled gravestone. On it, it read:

DANILE WHEATHERBY

1899-19622

He has joined his beloved wife in a better land.

I felt a shovel thrust into my hands and suddenly I was sure that I couldn't go through with it. But I remembered the bursar shaking his head and saying, "I'm afraid we can't give you any more time, Dan. You'll have to leave today. If I could help in any way, I would, believe me..."

I dug into the still soft earth and lifted it over my shoulder. Perhaps fifteen minutes later my shovel came in contact with wood. The two of us quickly excavated the hole until the coffin stood revealed under Rankin's flashlight. We jumped down and heaved the coffin up.

Numbed, I watched Rankin swing the spade at the locks and seals. After a few blows it gave and we lifted the lid. The body of Daniel Wheatherby looked up at us with glazed eyes. I felt horror gently wash over me. I had always thought that the eyes closed when one died.

“Don’t just stand there,” Rankin whispered, “it’s almost four. We’ve got to get out of here!”

We wrapped the body in a sheet and lowered the coffin back into the earth. We shoveled rapidly and carefully replaced the sod. The dirt we had missed was scattered.

By the time we picked up the white-sheeted body, the first traces of dawn were beginning to lighten the sky in the east. We went through the hedge that skirted the cemetery and entered the woods that fronted it on the west. Rankin expertly picked his way through it for a quarter of a mile until we came to the car, parked where we had left it on an overgrown and unused wagon track that had once been a road. The body was put into the trunk. Shortly thereafter, we joined the stream of commuters hurrying for the 6. 00 train.

I looked at my hands as if I had never seen them before. The dirt under my fingernails had been piled up on top of a man’s final resting place not twenty-four hours ago. It felt unclean.

Rankin’s attention was directed entirely on his driving. I looked at him and realized that he didn’t mind the repulsive act that we had just performed. To him it was just another job. We turned off the main road and began to climb the twisting, narrow dirt road. And then we came out into the open and I could see it, the huge rambling Victorian mansion that sat on the summit of the steep grade. Rankin drove around back and wordlessly up to the steep rock face of a bluff that rose another forty feet upward, slightly to the right of the house.

There was a hideous grinding noise and a portion of the hill large enough to carve an entrance for the car slid open. Rankin drove in and killed the engine. We were in a small, cube-like room that served as a hidden garage. Just then, a door at the far end slid open and a tall, rigid man approached us.

Steffen Weinbaum’s face was much like a skull; his eyes were deep-set and the skin was stretched so tautly over his cheekbones that his flesh was almost transparent.

“Where is it?” His voice was deep, ominous.

Wordlessly, Rankin got out and I followed his lead. Rankin opened the trunk and we pulled the sheet-swaddled figure out.

Weinbaum nodded slowly.

“Good, very good. Bring him into the lab.”

CHAPTER TWO

When I was thirteen, my parents were killed in an automobile crash. It left me an orphan and should have landed me in an orphan's home. But my father's will disclosed the fact that he had left me a substantial sum of money and I was self-reliant. The welfare people never came around and I was left in the somewhat bizarre role as the sole tenant of my own house at thirteen. I paid the mortgage out of the bank account and tried to stretch a dollar as far as possible.

By the time I was eighteen and was out of school, the money was low, but I wanted to go to college. I sold the house for \$10,000.00 through a real estate buyer. In early September, the roof fell in. I received a very nice letter from Erwin, Erwin and Bradstreet, attorneys at law. To put it in layman's language, it said that the department store at which my father had been employed had just got around to a general audit of their books. It seemed that there was \$15,000.00 missing and that they had proof that my father had stolen it. The rest of the letter merely stated that if I didn't pay up the \$15,000.00 we'd got to court and they would try to get double the amount.

It shook me up and a few questions that should have stood out in my mind just didn't register as a result. Why didn't they uncover the error earlier? Why were they offering to settle out of court?

I went down to the office of Erwin, Erwin, & Bradstreet and talked the matter over. To make a long story short, I paid the sum there were asking, I had no more money.

The next day I looked up the firm of Erwin, Erwin & Bradstreet in the phone book. It wasn't listed. I went down to their office and found a For Rent sign on the door. It was then that I realized that I had been conned like gullible kid—which, I reflected miserably was what I was.

I bluffed my way through the first for months of college but finally they discovered that I hadn't been properly registered.

That same day I met Rankin at a bar. It was my first experience in a tavern. I had a forged driver's license and I bought enough whiskey to get drunk. I figured that it would take about two straight whiskeys since I had never had anything but a bottle of beer now and then prior to that night.

One felt good, two made my trouble seem rather inconsequential. I was nursing my third when Rankin entered the bar.

He sat on the stool next to me and looked attentively at me.

"You got troubles?" I asked rudely.

Rankin smiled. "Yes, I'm out to find a helper."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, becoming interested. "You mean you want to hire somebody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm your man."

He started to say something and then changed his mind.

"Let's go over to a booth and talk it over, shall we?"

We walked over to a booth and I realized that I was listing slightly. Rankin pulled the curtain.

"That's better. Now, you want a job?"

I nodded.

"Do you care what it is?"

"No. Just how much does it pay?"

"Five hundred a job."

I lost a little bit of the rosy fog that encased me. Something was wrong here. I didn't like the way he used the word "job".

"Who do I have to kill?" I asked with a humorless smile.

"You don't. But before I can tell you what it is, you'll have to talk with Mister Weinbaum."

"Who's he?"

"A—scientist."

More fog evaporated. I got up.

"Uh-uh. No making a human guinea pig out of yours truly. Get yourself another boy."

"Don't be silly," he said, "No harm will come to you."

Against my better judgement, I said, "Okay, let's go."

CHAPTER THREE

Weinbaum approached the subject of my duties after a tour of the house, including the laboratory. He wore a white smock and there was something about him that made me crawl inside. He sat down in the living room and motioned me into a seat. Rankin had disappeared. Weinbaum stared at me with fixed eyes and once again I felt a blast of icy coldness sweep over me.

“I’ll put it to you bluntly,” he said, “my experiments are too complicated to explain in any detail, but they concern human flesh. Dead human flesh.”

I was becoming intensely aware that his eyes burnt with flickering fires. He looked like a spider ready to engulf a fly, and this whole house was his web. The sun was striking fire to the west and deep pools of shadows were spreading across the room, hiding his face, but leaving the glittering eyes as they shifted in the creeping darkness.

He was still speaking. “Often, people bequeath their bodies to scientific institutes for study. Unfortunately, I’m only one man, so I have to resort to other methods.”

Horror leapt grinning from the shadows and across my mind there flitted the black picture of two men digging by the light of an uncertain moon. A shovel struck wood—the noise chilled my soul. I rose quickly.

“I think I can find my own way out, Mr. Weinbaum.”

He laughed softly. “Did Rankin tell you how much this job pays?”

“I’m not interested.”

“Too bad. I was hoping you could see it my way. It wouldn’t take a year before you would make enough money to return to college.”

I started, and got the uncanny feeling that this man was searching my soul.

“How much do you know about me? How did you find out?”

“I have my ways.” He chuckled again. “Will you reconsider?”

I hesitated.

“Shall we put it on a trial basis?” he asked softly. “I’m quite sure that we can both reach a mutual satisfaction.”

I got the eerie feeling that I was talking to the devil himself, that somehow I had been tricked into selling my soul.

“Be here at 8. 00 sharp, the night after next,” he said.

That was how it started.

As Rankin and I laid the sheeted body of Daniel Whetherby on the lab table, lights flashed on behind sheeted oblongs that looked like glass tanks.

“Weinbaum—” I had dropped the title, Mister, without thinking, “I think—”

“Did you say something?” he asked, his eyes boring into mine. The laboratory seemed far away. There were only the two of us, sliding through a half-world peopled with horrors beyond the imagination.

Rankin entered in a white smock coat and broke the spell by saying, “All ready, professor.”

At the door, Rankin stopped me. “Friday, at eight.”

A shudder, cold and terrible raced up my spine as I looked back. Weinbaum had produced a scalpel and the body was unsheeted. They looked at me strangely and I hurried out.

I took the car and quickly drove down the narrow dirt road. I didn't look back. The air was fresh and warm with a promise of budding summer. The sky was blue with fluffy white clouds fleeting along in the warm summer breeze. The night before seemed like a nightmare, a vague dream, that, as all nightmares, is unreal and transparent when the bright light of day shines upon it. But as I drove past the wrought iron gates of the Crestwood Cemetery I realized that this was no dream. Four hours ago my shovel had removed the dirt that covered the grave of Daniel Wheatherby.

For the first time a new thought occurred to me. What was the body of Daniel Wheatherby being used for at that moment? I shoved the thought into a deep corner of my mind and let out onto the go-pedal. The care screamed ahead I put my thoughts into driving, glad to put the terrible thing I had done out of my mind, for a short time, anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

The California countryside blurred by as I tried for the maximum speed. The tyres sang on the curve and, as I came out of it, several things happened in rapid succession.

I saw a panel truck crazily parked right on the broken white line, a girl of about eighteen running right toward my car, an older man running after her. I slammed on the brakes and they exploded like bombs. I jockeyed the wheel and the California sky was suddenly under me. Then everything was right-side up and I realized that I had flipped right over and up. For a moment I was dazed, then a scream, shrill and high, piercing, slit my head.

I opened the door and sprinted toward the road. The man had the girl and was yanking her toward the panel truck. He was stronger than her and winning, but she was taking an inch of skin for every foot he made.

He saw me.

“You stay out of this, buddy. I’m her legal guardian.”

I halted and shook the cobwebs out of my brain. It was exactly what he had been waiting for. He let go with a haymaker that got me on the corner of the chin and knocked me sprawling. He grabbed the girl and practically threw her into the cab.

By the time that I was on me feet he was around to the driver’s side and peeling out. I took a flying leap and made the roof just as he took off. I was almost thrown off, but I clawed through about five layers of paint to stay on. Then I reached through the open window and got him by the neck. He cursed and grabbed my hand. He yanked, the truck spun crazily off the ledge of a steep embankment.

The last thing I remember is the nose of the truck pointing straight down. Then my enemy saved my life by viciously yanking my arm. I

tumbled off just as the truck plunged over the cliff.

I landed hard, but the rock I landed on was harder. Everything slid away.

Something cool touched my brow as I came to. The first thing I saw was the flashing red light on top of the official looking car parked by the embankment. I sat bolt upright and soft hands pushed me down. Nice hands, the hands of the girl who had landed me into this mess.

Then there was a Highway Patrolman over me and an official voice said, "The ambulance is coming. How do you feel?"

"Bruised," I said and sat up again. "But tell the ambulance to go away. I'm all right."

I tried to sound flippant. The last thing I needed after last night's 'job' was the police.

"How about telling me about it?" the policeman said, producing a notebook. Before I answered, I walked over to the embankment. My stomach flipped over backwards. The panel truck was nose-deep in California dirt and my sparring partner was turning that good California soil into a reddish mud with his own blood. He lay grotesquely, sprawled half in, half out of the cab. The photographers were getting their pictures. He was dead.

I turned back. The patrolman looked at me as if he expected me to throw up, but, after my new job, my stomach was admirably strong.

"I was driving out of the Belwood district," I said, "I came around that curve..."

I told the rest of the story with the girl's help. Just as I finished the ambulance came to a halt. Despite my protestations and those of my still-unnamed girl friend, we were hustled into the back.

Two hours later we had a clean bill of health from the patrolman and the doctors and we were requested to be witnesses at the inquest set for the next week.

I saw my car at the curb. It was a little worse for wear, but the flats had been replaced. There was a witnessed bill on the dash for a wrecker, tires, and clean-up squad! It came to about \$250. 00—half of the last night's pay-check.

"You look preoccupied," the girl said.

I turned to her. "Um, yeah. Well, we almost got killed together this morning, how about telling me your name and having lunch together?"

"Okay," she said. "The name's Vicki Pickford. Yours?"

"Danny," I said unemotionally as we pulled away from the curb. I switched the subject rapidly. "What was going on this morning? Did I hear that guy say that he was your legal guardian?"

"Yes" she replied.

I laughed. "The name is Danny Gerad. You'll get that out of the afternoon papers."

She smiled gravely. "All right. He was my guardian. He was also a drunkard and an all-around crumb."

Her cheeks flamed red. The smile was gone. "I hated him and I'm glad he's dead."

She gave me a sharp glance and for a moment I saw fear shine wetly in her eyes; then she recovered her self-control. We parked and ate lunch.

Forty minutes later I paid the check out of my newly acquired cash and walked back out to the car.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Bonaventure Motel,” she said. “That’s where I’m staying.”

She saw curiosity jump into my eyes and sighed, “All right, I was running away. My Uncle David caught up with me and tried to drag me back to the house. When I told him I wouldn’t go, he dragged me out to the truck. We were going around that curve when I wrenched the wheel out of his hands. Then you came along.”

She closed up like a clam and I didn’t try to get any more out of her. There was something wrong about her story. I didn’t press her. I drove her into the parking lot and killed the engine.

“When can I see you again?” I asked. “A movie tomorrow?”

“Sure,” she replied.

“I’ll pick you up at 7. 30,” I said and drove out, thoughtfully pondering the events that had befallen me in the last twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I entered the apartment the phone was ringing. I picked it up and Vicki, accident and the bright workaday world of suburban California faded into the half-world of phantom-people shadows. The voice that whispered coldly out of the receiver was Weinbaum's

"Troubles?" He spoke softly, but there was an ominous tone in his voice.

"I had an accident," I replied.

"I read about it in the paper..." Weinbaum's voice trailed off. Silence hung between us for a moment and then I said, "Does this mean you're canning me?"

I hoped that he would say yes; I didn't have the guts to resign.

"No," he said softly, "I just wanted to make sure that you didn't reveal anything about the—work—you're doing for me."

"Well, I didn't" I told him curtly.

"The night after this," he reminded me, "At eight."

There was a click and then the dial tone. I shivered and hung up the receiver. I had the oddest feeling that I had just broken connection with the grave.

The next morning at 7. 30 sharp, I picked up Vicki at the Bonaventure Motel. She was all decked out in an outfit that made her look stunning. I made a low whistle; she flushed prettily. We didn't talk about the accident.

The movie was good and we held hands part of the time, ate popcorn part of the time and kissed once or twice. All in all, a pleasant evening.

The second feature was just drawing to the climax when an usher came down the aisle.

He was stopping at every row and looked peeved. Finally, he stopped at ours. He swept the flashlight down the row and asked "Mr. Gerad? Daniel Gerad?"

"Yes" I asked, feeling guilt and fear run through me. "There's a gentleman on the phone, sir. He says it's a matter of life or death."

Vicki gave me a startled look and I followed the usher hurriedly. That let out the police. I mentally took stock of my only remaining relatives. Aunt Polly, Grandma Phibbs and my great-uncle Charlie. They were all healthy as far as I knew.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I picked up the telephone and heard Rankin's voice.

He spoke rapidly and a raw note of fear was in his voice. "Get out here, right now! We need—"

There were sounds of a a scuffle, a muffled scream, then a click and the empty dial tone.

I hung, up and hurried back for Vicki. "Come on," I said.

She followed without questioning me. At first I wanted to drive her back to the motel but the muffled scream made me decide that this was an emergency. I didn't like either Rankin or Weinbaum, but I knew I would have to help them.

We took off.

"What is it?" Vicki asked anxiously as I stamped on the go-pedal and let the car unwind.

"Look," I said, "something tells me that you've got your secrets about your guardian. I've got some of my own. Please, don't ask." She didn't say another word.

I took possession of the passing lane. The speedometer climbed from seventy-five to eighty-five, kept rising and trembled on the verge of ninety. I pulled into the turnoff on two wheels and the car bounced, clung and exploded up the road.

Grim and gaunt against the overcast sky, I could see the house. I pulled the car to a stop and was out in a second.

“Wait here,” I cried over my shoulder to Vicki.

There was a light on in the laboratory and I flung the door open. It was empty but ransacked. The place was a mess of broken test tubes, smashed apparatus, and, yes, bloodstains that trailed through the half-open door that led to the darkened garage. Then I noticed the green liquid that was flowing over the floor in sticky rivulets. For the first time I noticed that one of the several sheeted tanks had been broken. I walked over to the other three. The lights inside them were off and the sheets that draped them let by no hint of what might have been under them—or, for that matter, what was under them.

I had no time to see. I didn't like the looks of blood, still fresh and uncoagulated, that led out of the front door into the garage. I swung open the door and entered the garage. It was dark and I didn't know where the light switch was. I cursed myself for not bringing the flashlight that was in the glove compartment. I advanced a few steps and realized that there was a cold draft blowing against my face. I advanced toward it.

The light from the lab threw a golden shaft of light along the garage floor, but it was next to nothing, in the Styngan blackness of the garage. All my childish fears of the dark returned. Once again I entered the realms of terror that only a child can know. I realized that the shadow that leered at me from out of the dark might not be dispelled by bright light.

Suddenly, my right foot went down. I realized that the draft was coming from a stairway I had almost fallen down. For a moment I

debated, then turned and hurried back through the lab and out to the car.

CHAPTER SIX

Vicki pounced on me as soon as I opened the door. “Danny, what are you doing here?”

Her tone of voice made me look at her. In the sickly yellow glow of the light her face was terrified.

“I’m working here,” I said shortly.

“At first I didn’t realize where we were,” she said softly. I was only here once before.

“You’ve been here?” I exclaimed. “When? “Why?”

“One night,” she said quietly “I brought Uncle David his lunch. He forgot it.”

The name rang a bell. She saw me grasping for it. “My guardian,” she said. “Perhaps I’d better tell you the whole story. Probably, you know that people don’t get appointed guardians when they drink. Well, Uncle David didn’t always do those things. When my mother and father were killed in a train-wreck four years ago, my Uncle David was the kindest person you could imagine. The court appointed him my guardian until I came of age, with my complete support.”

For a moment she was quiet, living in memories and the expression that flitted rapidly through her eyes was not pretty. Then she went on.

“Two years ago the company he was working for as a night watchman folded up and my uncle was out of a job. He was out of work for almost half a year. We were getting desperate, with

only unemployment checks to feed us and college looming up for me. Then he got a job. It was a good paying one and it brought in

fabulous sums. I used to joke with him about the banks be robbed. One night he looked at me and said, 'Not banks. '''

I felt fear and guilt tap me on the shoulder with cold fingers. Vicki went on.

“He started to get mean. He started bringing home whisky and getting drunk. The times I asked him about his job he evaded me. One night he told me point-blank to mind my own business.”

“I watched him decay before my very eyes. Then one night he let a name slip—Weinbaum, Steffen Weinbaum. A couple of weeks later he forgot his midnight lunch. I looked up the name in the telephone book and took it out to him. He flew into the most terrible rage I have ever seen.”

“In the weeks that followed he was away more and more at this terrible house. One night, when he came home he beat me. I decided to run away. To me, the Uncle David I knew was dead. He caught me—and you came along.” She fell silent.

I was shaken right down to my boots. I had a very good idea what Vicki's uncle did for a living. The time Rankin had signed me up coincided with the time Vicki's guardian would have been cracking up. I almost drove away then, despite the wild shambles the lab was in, despite the secret stairway, despite the blood trail on the floor. But then a faraway, thin scream reached us. I thumbed the glove compartment button, and reached in, fumbled around and got the flashlight.

Vicki's hand went to my arm “No, Danny. Please, Don't. I know that there's something terrible going on here. Drive away from it!”

The scream sounded again, this time fainter, and I made up my mind. I grabbed the flashlight. Vicki saw my intention. “All right, I'm coming with you.”

“Uh-uh,” I said. “You stay here. I’ve got a feeling that there’s something... loose out there. You stay here.”

She unwillingly sat back. I shut the door and ran back to the lab. I didn’t pause, but went back into the garage. The flashlight illuminated the dark hole where the wall had slid away to reveal the staircase. My blood pounding thickly in my temples, I ventured down into it. I counted the steps, shining the flashlight at the featureless walls, at the impenetrable darkness below. “Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three—”

At thirty, the stairway suddenly became a short passage. I started cautiously along it, wishing that I had a revolver, or even a knife to make me feel a little less naked and vulnerable.

Suddenly a scream, terrible and thick with fear soon sounded in the darkness ahead of me. It was the sound of terror, the sound of a man confronted with something out of the deepest pits of horror. I broke into a run. As I ran I realized that the draft was blowing coldly against my face. I reasoned that the tunnel must come out in the outdoors. I stumbled over something.

It was Rankin, lying in a pool of his own blood, his eyes staring in glazed horror at the ceiling. The back of his head was bashed in.

Ahead of me I heard a pistol shot, a curse, and another scream. I ran on and almost fell on my face as I stumbled over more stairs. I climbed and saw stairs framed vaguely in an opening screened with underbrush above me. I pushed it aside and came upon a startling tableau: a tall figure silhouetted against the sky that could only be Weinbaum, a revolver hanging in his hand, looking down at the shadowed ground. Even the starlight was blotted out as the hanging clouds that had parted briefly, closed together again.

He heard me and wheeled quickly, his eyes glazing like red lanterns in the dark.

“Oh, it you Gerad.”

“Rankin’s dead.” I told him.

“I know.” he said, “You could have prevented it if you had come a little quicker”

“Now just hold on,” I said, becoming angry. “I hurried—”

I was cut off by a sound that has hounded me through nightmares ever since, a hideous mewing sound, like that of some gigantic rat in pain. I saw calculation, fear, and finally decision flicker across Weinbaum’s face in a matter of seconds. I fell back in terror.

“What is it?” I choked.

He casually shone the light down into the pit, for all his affected casualness, I noticed that his eyes were averted by something.

The thing mewed again and I felt another spasm of fear. I craned to see what horror lay in that pit, the horror that made even Weinbaum scream in abject terror. And just before I saw, a horrible wall of terror rose and fell from the vague outline of the house.

Weinbaum jerked his flashlight from the pit and shone it in my face.

“Who was that? Whom did you bring up here?”

But I had my own flashlight trained as I ran through the passage way, Weinbaum close behind. I had recognized the scream. I had heard it before, when a frightened girl almost ran into my car as she fled her maniac of a guardian.

Vicki!

CHAPTER SEVEN

I heard Weinbaum gasp as we entered the lab. The place was swimming in the green, liquid. The other two cases were broken!. I didn't pause, but ran past the shattered, empty cases and out the door. Weinbaum did not follow me.

The car was empty, the door on the passengers side open. I shone my light over the ground. Here and there were footprints of a girl wearing high heels, a girl who had to be Vicki. The rest of the tracks were blotted out by a monstrous something—I hesitate to call it a track. It was more as if something huge had dragged itself into the woods. Its hugeness was testified, too, as I noticed the broken saplings and crushed underbrush.

I ran back into the lab where Weinbaum was sitting, face pale and drawn, regarding the three shattered empty tanks. The revolver was on the table and I grabbed it and made for the door.

“Where do you think you're going with that?” he demanded, rising.

“Out to hunt for Vicki,” I snarled. “And if she's hurt or—” I didn't finish.

I hurried out into the velvet darkness of the night. Gun in hand, flashlight in the other, I plunged into the woods, following the trail blazed by something that I didn't want to think about. The vital question that burned in my mind was whether it had Vicki or was still trailing her. If it had her...

My question was answered by a piercing scream not too far away from me.

Faster now, I ran and suddenly burst into a clearing.

Perhaps it is because I want to forget, or perhaps it is only because the night was dark and beginning to become foggy, but I can only

remember how Vicki caught sight of my flashlight, ran to me, buried her head against my shoulder and sobbed.

A huge shadow moved toward me, mewling horribly, driving me almost mad with terror. Stumblingly, we fled from the horror in the dark, back toward the comforting lights of the lab, away from the unseen terror that lurked in the dark. My fear-crazed brain was putting two and two together and coming up with five.

The three cases had contained three something from the darkest pits of a twisted mind. One had broken loose. Rankin and Weinbaum had been after it. It had killed Rankin, but Weinbaum had trapped it in the concealed pit. The second one was floundering in the woods now and I suddenly remembered that whatever-it-was, was huge and that it had a hard time lifting itself along. Then I realized that it had trapped Vicki in a gully. It had started down—easy enough! But getting up? I was almost positive that it couldn't.

Two were out of commission. But where was the third? My question was answered very suddenly but a scream from the lab. And... mewling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We ran up to the lab door and threw it open. It was empty. The screams and the terrible mewling sounds came from the garage. I ran through, and ever since have been glad that Vicki stayed in the lab and was spared the sight that had wakened me from a thousand awful nightmares.

The lab was darkened and all that I could make out was a huge shadow moving sluggishly. And the screams! Screams of terror, the screams of a man faced with a monster from the pits of hell. It mewed horribly and seemed to pant in delight.

My hand moved around for a light switch. There, I found it! Light flooded the room, illuminating a tableau of horror that was the result of the grave thing I had performed, I and the dead uncle.

A huge, white maggot twisted on the garage floor, holding Weinbaum with long suckers, raising him towards its dripping, pink mouth from which horrid mewling sounds came. Veins, red and pulsating, showed under its slimy flesh and millions of squirming tiny maggots—in the blood vessels, in the skin, even forming a huge eye that stared out at me. A huge maggot, made up of hundreds of millions of maggots, the feasters on the dead flesh that Weinbaum had used so freely.

In a half-world of terror I fired the revolver again and again. It mewed and twitched.

Weinbaum screamed something as he was dragged inexorably toward the waiting mouth. Incredibly, I made it out over the hideous sound that the creature was making.

“Fire it! In the name of heaven, fire it!”

Then I saw the sticky pools of green liquid which had trickled over the floor from the laboratory. I fumbled for my lighter, got it and

frantically thumbed it. Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to put a flint in. I reached for matches, got one and fired the others. I threw the pack just as Weinbaum screamed his last. I saw his body through the translucent skin of the creature, still twitching as thousands of maggots leeches onto it. Retching, I threw the now flaring matches into the green ooze. It was flammable, just as I had thought. It burst into bright flames. The creature was twisted into a horrid ball of pulsing, putrid flesh.

I turned and stumbled out to where Vicki stood, shaking and white faced.

“Come on!” I said, “Let’s get out of here! The whole place is going to go up!”

We ran out to the car and drove away rapidly.

CHAPTER NINE

There isn't too much left to say. I'm sure that you have all read about the fire that swept the residential Belwood District of California, leveling fifteen square miles of woods and residential homes. I couldn't feel too badly about that fire. I realize that hundreds might have been killed by the gigantic maggot-things that Weinbaum and Rankin were breeding. I drove out there after the fire. The whole place was smoldering ruins. There was no discernable remains of the horror that we had battled that final night, and, after some searching, I found a metal cabinet. Inside there were three ledgers.

Once of them was Weinbaum's diary. It clears up a lot. It revealed that they were experimenting on dead flesh, exposing it to gamma rays. One day they observed a strange thing. The few maggots that had crawled over the flesh were growing, becoming a group. Eventually they grew together, forming three separate large maggots. Perhaps the radioactive bomb had speed up the evolution.

I don't know.

Furthermore, I don't want to know.

In a way, I suppose, I assisted in Rankin's death; the flesh of the body whose grave I had robbed had fed perhaps the very creature that had killed him.

I live with that thought. But I believe that there can be forgiveness. I'm working for it. Or, rather, we're working for it.

Vicki and I. Together.

THE END